

Message Text

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E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: US, UR, FR, PFOR

SUBJECT: BREZHNEV'S HEALTH AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE
U.S.

FOLLOWING WAS SENT TO SECRETARY BY INR -- SAUNDERS AND
EUR -- VEST ON JUNE 30:

1. FRENCH COMMENTARIES ON BREZHNEV'S HEALTH AND PERFOR-
MANCE DURING HIS PARIS SUMMIT ARE BUT THE LATEST SIGNS
THAT HE MAY NO LONGER BE IN COMMAND OF ALL ASPECTS OF
SOVIET POLICY. THE EVIDENCE IS NOT CONCLUSIVE BUT IS
PERSUASIVE ENOUGH TO RAISE QUESTIONS ABOUT ITS IMPLICATIONS
FOR US POLICY.

2. THE EVIDENCE -- AS YOU KNOW, BREZHNEV IS 70 AND SUFFERS
FROM A HOST OF PHYSICAL AILMENTS, THE MOST SERIOUS OF
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WHICH ARE CARDIOVASCULAR. COMBINED WITH A MARKED DECLINE
IN HIS VITALITY, THESE ILLS PROBABLY CAUSED THE SEMI-
IMMOBILISM NOTED BY FINNISH PRESIDENT KEKKONEN, GENSCHER,
AND, MOST RECENTLY, GISCARD. THE EXTENT TO WHICH BREZHNEV'S
HYPOCHONDRIA AND SELF-MEDICATION CONTRIBUTE TO HIS
ALTERNATING MOODS IS PROBLEMATIC, BUT IT IS CLEAR THAT
HE WANTED HIS PARIS DEBUT AS SOVIET "PRESIDENT" TO BE A

SUCCESS.

3. WHY HE WENT TO FRANCE, MUCH LESS ASSUMED THE PRESIDENCY, IS UNCLEAR, UNLESS HIS EGOISM AND SUCCESSION POLITIKING ARE FACTORED IN. WHETHER OR NOT HIS DEATH IS IMMINENT, IT IS CLEAR THAT HE HAS REACHED A STAGE IN WHICH, AT LEAST INTERMITTENTLY, HE CANNOT EXERCISE THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF HIS OFFICES.

4. THE MOST TELLING EVIDENCE TO THIS EFFECT ARE THE FINNISH AND FRENCH OBSERVATIONS THAT DURING THE COURSE OF THEIR NEGOTIATIONS BREZHNEV HAD TO BE PROPPED UP PHYSICALLY AND SUBSTANTIVELY. THE FRENCH SPECULATE THAT HE IS BEING MANIPULATED BY HARDLINE MEMBERS OF HIS IMMEDIATE ENTOURAGE. OTHER CLANDESTINE SOURCES ATTRIBUTE THE DISCREPANCY BETWEEN BREZHNEV'S PRO-DETENTISM AND CURRENT SOVIET PRACTICES TO THE GROWING ROLE PLAYED BY HIS CONSERVATIVE COLLEAGUES, SUCH AS SUSLOV.

5. BARRING A MEDICAL MIRACLE, BREZHNEV IS NOT GOING TO BE ABLE TO DETERMINE SOVIET POLICY TO THE EXTENT THAT HE HAS IN THE PAST. SHOULD HE ATTEMPT TO DO SO, GIVEN HIS GROWING DECREPITUDE AND POLICY FAILURES, SUCH AS IN AGRICULTURE AND SALT, HE RUNS THE RISK OF LOSING HIS GENERAL SECRETARYSHIP, THOUGH IT APPEARS UNLIKELY THAT HE WILL DEPART THE PRESIDENCY.

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6. IMPLICATIONS FOR US POLICY -- IF OUR READING OF THE EVIDENCE IS CORRECT, PRUDENCE SUGGESTS WE LOWER OUR EXPECTATIONS OF PROGRESS IN KEY AREAS OF US-SOVIET RELATIONS. THE SOVIETS HAVE NEVER BEEN QUICK TO COME TO TERMS WITH AMBITIOUS NEW PROPOSALS AND PRECEDENT INDICATES THAT DURING PERIODS OF WEAK LEADERSHIP-CUM-SUCCESSION, THE SOVIET DECISION-MAKING PROCESS TENDS TO BE CLOGGED, ESPECIALLY IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS, WHERE CONSERVATIVE POSTURING PREDOMINATES.

7. WE CANNOT CONFIDENTLY PREDICT HOW LONG THE PRESENT INTERREGNUM MAY LAST, BUT THE POTENTIALITIES FOR SOVIET MISCALCULATION ARE SUCH AS TO WARRANT OUR TAKING GREAT CARE IN FRAMING PROPOSALS AND RESPONSES, AS THE PITFALLS SEEM TO OUTNUMBER THE OPPORTUNITIES ON THE PATH AHEAD.

8. --PROSPECTS OF RAPID PROGRESS ARE DIMINISHED, AND THE HAZARDS OF A DOWNWARD SPIRAL IN OUR RELATIONS ARE GREATER. IF WE DRIFT INTO HEIGHTENED POLEMICS AND HOSTILITY, THERE IS A DANGER THAT THINGS COULD GET FROZEN IN THIS STATE WHEN THE GUARD CHANGES IN THE KREMLIN.

9. --CAUTION HAS BEEN THE HALLMARK OF PAST TRANSITION LEADERSHIPS IN THE KREMLIN, AND IF THE PAST IS A GUIDE WE WOULD EXPECT THE NEXT ONE TO STEP CAREFULLY TO AVOID CONFRONTATION. BUT A NEW COALITION IN MOSCOW WILL BE PARTICULARLY SENSITIVE TO WHAT IT MAY SEE AS US "TESTS" AND OVERREACT WITH UNPREDICTABLE CONSEQUENCES.

10. --A SUMMIT MEETING WITH A FADING BREZHNEV PROBABLY WOULD NOT PRODUCE MAJOR BREAKTHROUGHS ON SUBSTANCE, AND THERE IS A DANGER THAT RANCOR COULD RESULT IN CLOUDING THE AIR INSTEAD OF CLEARING IT. BUT WE STILL HAVE BREZHNEV'S CONCERN FOR HIS PLACE IN HISTORY TO PLAY UPON. AND, AS WITH THE FAILING MAO, WE CAN COMMUNICATE THROUGH BREZHNEV
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AS WELL AS TO HIM AND AT LEAST ACHIEVE A TONE OF COMMUNICATION WHICH COULD INFLUENCE A SUCCESSION LEADERSHIP. IN THE CHINA CASE, WE HAD MORE SUCCESS WITH MAO'S SLOBBERING AND SHAMBLING THROUGH CRITICAL MEETINGS WITH US REPRESENTATIVES WHILE HIS SUBORDINATES MADE DECISIONS THAN WE HAVE HAD SINCE MAO'S PASSING.

11. --IT MAY BE WORTH TRYING FOR AN EARLY, LIMITED SALT II TO HAVE AN AGREEMENT BEFORE BREZHNEV LEAVES THE SCENE. THIS MAY MEAN LEAVING MORE RATHER THAN LESS TO BE RESOLVED IN SALT III.

12. --GIVEN SOVIET PARANOIA ABOUT CHINA, THIS WOULD APPEAR TO BE A PARTICULARLY BAD TIME TO FLIRT WITH ANY FORM OF MILITARY RELATIONSHIP WITH PEKING. SUCH A MOVE ON OUR PART COULD CAUSE BREZHNEV'S SUCCESSORS TO ADOPT A MUCH HARDER POLICY TOWARD THE US. (MOVES TO NORMALIZE POLITICAL AND COMMERCIAL RELATIONS SHOULD NOT HAVE A COMPARABLE EFFECT.)

13. --CONSISTENT US SIGNALLING IS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT WHEN WE DON'T KNOW WHO WILL EVENTUALLY WIN OUT IN THE SUCCESSION. AS IT DEVELOPS, WE WILL HAVE TO BE CAREFUL TO KEEP OUR ACT TOGETHER AND PLAN OUR MOVES CAUTIOUSLY.

13. --OPENING NEW LINES OF COMMUNICATION COULD ALSO BE IMPORTANT. THE SOVIETS ARE GENUINELY PUZZLED ABOUT US AT THE MOMENT. WE SHOULD INSTRUCT AMBASSADOR TOON TO TRY FOR COURTESY CALLS ON ALL TOP SOVIET OFFICIALS AND, IF NEED BE, PUSH THE SOVIETS TO RECEIVE HIM.

15. --WE HAVE FEW "CARROTS" TO DANGLE AT THE MOMENT BUT IT WOULD BE WISE FOR US TO CONVEY THAT THE ADMINISTRATION
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BELIEVES SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL COOPERATION CAN CONTINUE ON A MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL BASIS AND THAT OUR LONG-RANGE POSTURE ALLOWS FOR EXPANSION OF ECONOMIC RELATIONS.

16. --BECAUSE IDEOLOGICAL ORTHODOXY IS AT A HIGH PREMIUM DURING PERIODS OF FLUX, THERE IS THE DANGER OF A TOUGHER SOVIET POLICY ON DISSENT, WHICH WILL LEAD TO A HARSHER DIALOGUE ON HUMAN RIGHTS. WE CAN DO LITTLE TO AVOID THIS BEYOND CONTINUING TO ATTEMPT TO REMAIN EVEN-HANDED AND NON-POLEMICAL, WHILE CONVEYING PRIVATELY TO THE SOVIETS THE FACT THAT BLATANTLY REPRESSIVE ACTIONS COULD POISON OUR ENTIRE RELATIONSHIP.
CHRISTOPHER

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